

REASON AND FAITH

BY JOHN S. MARSHALL

MOST OF US enjoy taking an extreme position in a religious or political controversy. It seems so neat and clear to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the position which we espouse. Sometimes we say in a controversy with a man who believes in the state ownership of public utilities, "Why not be consistent and abolish private property altogether?" Such an extreme position we term "logical" and "reasonable." "Why not be reasonable," we say, "and give up all religion if you doubt the historical validity of the scriptures of a given religious tradition?" "Why not be logical," we say to the doubter of some dogma, "and surrender religion entirely?" In such cases we think that the reasonable course of action leads to the carrying out of the principle to its utter limit of application. It gives us high emotional satisfaction to allow one principle, in its extreme form, to occupy the whole attention to the exclusion of every other modifying aspect of the situation.

I imagine that if we should study the mind of Cardinal Newman with psychological penetration we should find this type of theory working within his mind. It becomes explicit in his logical writings, and it accounts for many of his conceptions of church history. One only has to read his *Essay on Ecclesiastical Miracles*¹ to see that he is determined to believe in the whole range of ecclesiastical miracles at any cost. He was committed to the principle of miracles, and he intended to believe in all the miracles recorded. This becomes particularly clear when he discusses the supposed miracle of the African Confessors, who according to the records talked after their tongues had been removed. When reliable evidence was collected to show that men had frequently been able to talk after such an operation, Newman tells us that doubt may work both ways.

¹ Now published in *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles*.

and that it is as reasonable for him to be sceptical about the assumption that the Confessors talked naturally as that his critics should doubt the miracle.² In other words, he has committed himself to a belief in miracles, and he will take the principle of miracles to the extreme limit, because he has set his heart on miracles. So many men think that if they are patriotic they cannot be internationalists, that if they are true Americans they cannot reasonably admire a single foreign country.

This seems to me a false logic and a concession to a weak type of character building. Despite much popular opinion to the contrary, I cannot help believing that a compromise is often more reasonable than a single principle carried to the extreme. For example: it seems to me definitely false to say that a church is reactionary in principle because it has kept the historic form of church government, and many of the ancient forms of worship. We are sometimes told that if we are to be genuine Liberals, we must allow no taint of anything historic to touch us. Some Liberals succeed so well at this task that they become quite unlike the true saints of the ancient faiths—men like St. Francis and Jesus—and find themselves all too like the bigots of Fundamentalism. In such cases extremes are really not so different after all, and actually differ in details and name rather than in spirit.

Now all of this is pertinent to a discussion of the relation of Faith to Reason. There have been times in the history of the Christian Church and Mohammedan Churches when pure reason was exalted. Such a time for Christianity was the eighteenth century. No taint of "enthusiasm," for so faith and emotion were then called, was allowed to contaminate the perfect beauty of pure rationality. Of course mere reason was very barren, and it was not surprising that a Rationalist, Pascal, discovered that it gave him little of what religion should mean to him. So he gave over religion to that which lay outside of reason, if not to the positively irrational; he surrendered it to "the heart" which has "reasons" that are true even though they contradict reason. Intellectually he doubted the truth of Christianity; but with his heart he believed what his intellect told him was absurd. Our college students are frequently desirous of a proof of the truth of religion from the purely intellectual point of view. They want a geometrical proof

² *Ibid.*, pp. 392; 393.

of the existence of God. Theirs is a reaction from the purely faith type of religion:

“To doubt would be disloyalty,

To falter would be sin.”

They have been told that thought is a handicap to the religious life, that man-made systems have no value, that our attempts to find God are futile. The whole essence of Christianity is to “trust and obey.” Yet the fruits of ignorant and superstitious belief may be decayed and unholy. How often ignorance and superstition have blighted well-meaning lives. The difficulty with a religion of mere faith is that it has no adequate touch with the reality of the world, no contact with the laws of human life and that nature which moulds and modifies human life. The life that is based solely upon the faith attitude has no knowledge to sweeten faith and to make an assurance that touches the real center of human personality. That is the reason why an irrational faith so often passes over into a rationalistic scepticism. Many times our young people who have been taught to despise reason learn its value, and in the excess of new light, turn into complete rationalists. Again the meeting of extremes!

What we need is a logic of religion that avoids these extremes. I have said that a compromise is often more satisfactory than either of two extremes. That does not mean that a compromise is entirely satisfactory. It does mean that the success of the compromise indicates that we need to seek a conception that takes up the value of both of the extremes. What we need at the center of our religious life is a reasonable faith. We ought to view the mind as fundamentally adventurous, and when at its best trustful, but living in the attitude of trust because the confidence is wise, and because intelligence has guided faith in the direction of its quest. Our hypothesis of life should be sane, and should be criticized by the deepest power of thought. Thus only shall we avoid superstition. But even with the most searching thought, we cannot have final proof of religious truth before we live our lives. It is only in the long search of experimenting and discovering that we think about the meaning of experience and then go forth in the attitude of reasonable trust. Thus we learn by degrees the meaning of religion.

After all we must remember that such a venture creates a

teachable and loveable man. The attitude of eager inquiry and teachableness is what is so loveable in little children. So often the man who has mere faith and no trust in reason turns out to be a dogmatist who cannot be taught, who is accordingly not like the little child who desires to learn. So often the rationalist without faith is not like the little child who hopes and trusts the world about him, who though mistaken in many things is right in that he believes there is a reason for everything and that if he seeks he shall find it. The true attitude, it seems to me, is that of reasonable faith, a faith that modifies its views when the evidence requires it, a faith which joyfully learns the new but holds to the beautiful and true of the old, a faith which is adventurous and brave because it has found light in darkness and a gleam of love in the dark places. This is the type of mentality which works upon a method that is progressive, fearless and reasonable.